

Killing her would've been easy. All summer, we made flower garlands. All summer, petals were strewn across her kitchen table, where she drank her tea. If we dropped a petal of belladonna, a petal of poppy, and a petal of lily into that cup, we'd never really know which one of us killed her.

We'd never know which one of us was guilty.

The police wouldn't know either. We were, after all, three scrawny little creatures, no older than fourteen. What damage could we do intentionally? The death of Raven's stepmother would be ruled an accident, and we'd be reprimanded, sure, but none of us would be locked behind bars.

Only the monster would suffer. The woman who made Raven so sick and so scared, he was absent from school more than he was present. He'd been fine before she moved into his house. Bright and shining, like a prince from a fairy tale. Someone to live for. Fight for. Die for.

And that summer, I would've killed for him. I convinced the others to go along with it. I picked out a date. I did everything short of picking the flowers, because we each had to bring our own blossoms. One petal of belladonna. One petal of poppy. One petal of lily.

One petal, for each of our names.

But the night before the murder, one of us got cold feet and ruined everything. We all had to poison her together. That's what I thought, the summer we made flower garlands. The summer we spread them out on the table, where she drank her tea.

But three years later, on the eve of Raven's seventeenth birthday, his stepmother was found sprawled out on the kitchen floor, a shattered teacup beside her. It took a little time for the police to gather their evidence, and then they presented their findings to Raven's father.

Apparently, someone had taken a cluster of poisonous flowers and stuffed them into his wife's tea kettle.

No poppy. No lily. Just belladonna.

Two hours later, they came for me.

Chapter 1

Belladonna Killed Her

Belladonna Drake was entangled in her true love's arms when a knock came at the door. Slowly, quietly, she inched out of bed. "Don't say anything," she whispered, creeping toward the window.

Red and blue lights flashed below.

"Go out the back door," she instructed without turning around. "I'll stall them long enough for you to get away."

"Belle—"

"You were never here," Belle broke in, tossing a pile of clothes onto the bed. "You haven't set foot in my bedroom in *years*. All right?"

A nod in the darkness. Then a rustling of clothing as the two of them got dressed. Belle pulled on a soft, fluffy robe. With her hair tousled and her eyeliner smudged, it really would look like she'd woken from a dream. She wasn't hosting company. Everyone was exactly where they were supposed to be.

Taking a shaky breath, she hurried to the first floor. Opened the front door. Blinked up at the officer and said, "Hello? Is everything okay?"

"Belladonna Drake?"

"Ye—yes," she said, managing to stumble over one word. Great. That didn't bode well for the rest of the conversation. But she could lie about who'd been tangled in her arms that night. She'd done it before. She'd done it a lot. Just . . . not to the cops.

“You’re under arrest for the murder of Evelyn Holloway. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used—”

“Wait, what?” Belle’s vision blurred and the officer’s mouth stopped making noise, even though it was moving. “Raven’s stepmother is dead? I thought you were here for—”

The man jerked her arms behind her back, sliding handcuffs over her wrists. “You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you.”

“But I didn’t... I *couldn’t* have—”

“Then let’s hope you have an alibi,” he said, gesturing to the gaggle of officers standing by the door. They were going to wake her father, but he couldn’t account for her. He’d been snoring in his bedroom for hours. There was only one person in the world who could account for Belle’s whereabouts that night, and that person was long gone by now.

“Watch your head,” the officer said, guiding her into the police car. Belle ducked, sliding into the darkness. Through the window, she could see her adoptive father standing in the doorway, spittle flying from his mouth as he raged at the officers. *Typical Edwin*, she thought with a huff. At least some things could be counted on even in your darkest moments.

Some people.

“I need to make a call,” Belle said as the engine turned over. “I get to do that, right?”

“Who you gonna call?” the man asked, in this jovial tone that made her think he was going to start humming the *Ghostbusters* theme song. Everything about this was absurd. Belle wanted to tell herself it was a dream, because none of this could be happening, except . . . the rest of the night had been incredibly vivid. Those lips, trailing across her skin. Those hands, warm and familiar. Bright eyes. Mischievous smile. They’d hardly touched over the past few years, and yet, everything was exactly the way it had been the first time they’d held hands.

Like coming home.

Now her actual home was disappearing in the rearview, and the officer was saying, “Look, you don’t need to call an attorney. I’m guessing your rich daddy can arrange . . .” A pause as his gaze flicked to the estate in the mirror. The elegant Tudor rose up in the distance, surrounded by a perfectly manicured lawn. The only thing unruly about the estate was the garden, huge and overflowing with dahlias. Bougainville. Jasmine. And tucked in the back, in a corner:

Belladonna.

As beautiful as it was fatal. Belle had cultivated that little patch of flowers, telling herself stories about freeing Raven from his wicked stepmother. She’d come up with a plan. Now, three years later, she told herself she wouldn’t *really* have gone through with it. She was protective of her sweet, broken boy, but she wasn’t a killer.

None of them were.

“How did Mrs. Holloway die?” she asked softly. Every word that came out of her mouth, she analyzed. Did she sound innocent just then? Did she sound guilty? She *wasn’t* guilty, she told herself over and over again, but it was hard to believe that with cuffs around her wrists. It was harder to believe when the police station came into view.

“You tell me,” the officer said from the front seat. “You had a whole cluster of it in your yard. It even looked like some had been cut recently. We made sure to check before—”

“Cut?” Belle almost choked on the word. “Which plant was cut?”

“It had such a pretty name,” the man said, catching her eye in the mirror. “You have any guesses, Belladonna?”

The back of the car went silent. It was the middle of the night, so Belle expected it to be quiet, but in that moment, she heard *nothing*. It was like she was floating in the recesses of space. Everything dark, everything quiet. “They used belladonna?” she said after a minute. “How did you know to look in my yard? Who told—” She really should keep quiet. She had the right to remain silent, after all. Anything she said could and would be used against her in a court of law. Still, she couldn’t help but ask, “Did they use any other flowers? Poppies or . . .”

The man pulled up to the station, then climbed out of the car. Belle counted heartbeats as he strode to her door. Five. Ten. Fifteen. She managed to get to seventeen, the exact number of years she’d been on this earth, when the door swung open and the man reached for her. “Why would there be other flowers?” he asked, guiding her out of the darkness. “Belladonna killed her.”

Belle lost a bit of time after that. They were in the county police station, but they wouldn’t be holding her there for long. She was a minor, so she’d be sent to the detention center up on the hill. It was kind of funny, if she thought about it. Once upon a time there had been four of them: Raven, Lily, Poppy and Belle. But three years ago, Raven went away to boarding school on the other side of the country. Lily left soon after that. Poppy didn’t split town so much as *totally betray her*, leaving Belle to pick up the pieces of their shattered friendship.

Leaving her alone.

“Can you look someone up for me?” she asked when the officer finally let her make a call. “I don’t remember the number.”

He pushed out a laugh, muttering something about millennials. “What’s the name?”

“Poppy Jacqueline McClain. She used to go by Poppy but . . .” *She doesn’t anymore*, Belle thought, realizing she was rambling. After Raven moved away, Poppy had changed her

name to Jack. She'd started dressing in clothes that were typically relegated to the boys section of department stores, but she still went by *she*, and the cop wouldn't have understood that.

Probably, he wouldn't have.

Within seconds, he'd pulled up the number for the McClain residence, and then Belle was dialing. She prayed Jack would answer. She prayed Jack wouldn't slam down the phone the second she realized who was calling.

"Hello?" That familiar voice came on the line and Belle's hands started to shake. Tears filled her eyes.

"It's, um . . . it's me," she managed, dashing away the tears with her free hand. "Please don't hang up."

"Belle? Why are you calling me from county?"

"I . . ." How much should she say? These conversations were probably recorded. But even if they were, they couldn't be used in a court of law without her permission. Right? You had to agree to be recorded or it was inadmissible. She knew this, because three years earlier, she'd studied her rights. She'd prepared to be arrested after she put her plan into action. But the night before the murder, *someone* had gotten cold feet.

Now that someone was listening on the other end of the phone. "Belladonna," Jack said, her voice low and hard. "What happened? What did you—"

"Raven's stepmother was murdered," Belle blurted. "Someone used belladonna to kill her. *Only* belladonna," she added in a whisper.

"No. That's not possible, unless you—"

"I didn't. I swear. But Edwin was passed out in his bedroom all night, and no one can account for—"

“I can account for you,” Jack broke in. Her voice was calm. Steady. “I’m happy to be your alibi, Belle, because I was with you all night. It’s not like you’re asking me to lie.”

Belle counted to five. Ten. Seventeen. “Why are you helping me? You should hate me, after what I—”

“I do hate you sometimes,” Jack admitted. “But I love you too. That’s how it is with family.”

Belle smiled. She was still crying, but she wasn’t alone, and it made all the difference. Jack *was* her family. Raven too, before he went away. For years, the three of them had taken care of each other because the world had betrayed them. Their parents had betrayed them.

Together they’d been unstoppable.

“Listen, you don’t know how much this means to me,” Belle began as the officer stepped toward her. He wanted her to hang up the phone. But she needed to say this before she ended the call. “I thought I understood what happened three years ago, but I never asked you—”

“Don’t say anything,” Jack interrupted, her voice still calm. “I’m coming down to the station and I’m getting you out of there. Okay? By tomorrow, this will all be over. Try to stay positive.”

“How can I stay positive?”

“Because,” Jack said, and a chill unfurled in Belle’s spine. “Even though you’re innocent, you got what you wanted. Raven can come home.”